

## A PhD at LSE: the BME student diaries

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This research project seeks to understand the experiences of UK-domiciled Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) PhD students at the LSE.

### Introduction

The difference in academic achievement within the BME demographic in the U.K., known as the 'BME (or BAME) attainment gap' is receiving more attention by academia and management at all stages of education and increasingly at the higher education level. Numerous research projects have been conducted on the BME attainment gap in higher educational institutions in the U.K. Qualitative studies exploring this have revealed that BME undergraduate and postgraduate taught students feel underrepresented within their course content and cohorts and are hesitant to consult faculty for teaching guidance (Smith 2017; Phillips et al, 2017; Felix, 2019). Sara Felix, formerly of the LSE Teaching and Learning Centre (2018) contends that interventions must be situated within the context of the BME student experience at LSE. Recognising that existing research on this topic at the LSE has not included the experiences of BME students at the doctoral level, and in keeping with BME attainment gap research on UK-domiciled students, we sought to understand the experiences of UK-domiciled BME PhD students at LSE. Given that PhD students, as researchers, encounter a different application and academic experience from students at all other levels, we thought it important to explore how various social factors such as race and class may interact in this unique academic stage.

### Methodology

We conducted four semi-structured interviews, averaging at one hour each, with four BME students, 2 male and 2 female, across different departments at the LSE, asking participants about their social and academic backgrounds and experiences accessing and within their doctoral students, elaborating on relationships with supervisors, peers and role models. The interview transcripts were then interpreted using thematic analysis. We originally set out to conduct focus groups, which proved difficult to organise given the varied schedule of doctoral students and the very narrow population of interest. However, we recommend that future research be conducted on the same group through this method as the collective conception of experiences would have been insightful in responding to our enquiry.

### Findings

All participants shared that crucial to mitigating barriers to and within the PhD were social networks, whether family or neighbourhood, or minority peers within and outside their

programmes, who continued to inspire and motivate them along their journeys. Nonetheless, most UK-domiciled BME students lack the economic and social wherewithal necessary for matriculation to postgraduate study. These factors become more crucial at the doctoral level, where they face a more subjective admissions process. Acceptance by PhD supervisors was seen as the ultimate determinant of acceptance into a doctoral programme; without a shared sense of belonging between supervisor and supervisee, inevitably implying social factors such as race and class, it was unlikely for the supervisor to agree to supervise the applicant and therefore unlikely for these students to be accepted into a doctoral programme. These notions of exclusion were also experienced after successful admission into doctoral programmes, where the absence of BME faculty and peers created tensions around the validity of the contribution of these students to the diversity of approaches in academic research. In the context of commitments made by the LSE in its Inclusive Education Action Plan, such as to decolonise course curricula, it is crucial that the institution focuses on measures to improve the BME experience at the doctoral level, as these are the students most likely to enter academia and diversify course content and ways of understanding social problems.

## **Recommendations**

1. Supervision Relationship
  - a. Allocate funding and administration for preliminary meetings between doctoral supervisors and supervisees to develop a more informal rapport before adopting the formal academic relationship to foster common perspective going forward
  - b. Train academic staff, especially PhD supervisors in soft skills: how to develop a co-researcher (rather than vertical) rapport with their (BME) supervisees, including workshops on fostering mentorship attributes such as open-mindedness, encouragement and constructive criticism.
  - c. Establish an accountability framework for supervisees to evaluate supervisors, that is available for School Management to see, rewarding supervisors with particularly high mention and consulting those that may have poor rapports with their supervisees.
2. Avenues to address the concerns of BME (doctoral) students
  - a. Facilitate a formal association between the EmbRace staff network and BME (doctoral) students at the LSE, providing a forum where LSE Management is held accountable to mutually agreed recommended affirmative actions.
  - b. Facilitate formation of BME students forum within each department which gathers concerns of BME students at all levels, approved formally by the LSE
  - c. Provide an official forum within and across departments for the foregoing BME forum to voice concerns and recommendations
  - d. Beyond student representation meetings, offer formal opportunities specifically for BME students to be consulted about concrete inclusive strategies that can be adopted by their departments, for which there are concrete timelines for action and persons responsible, who can be held accountable to LSE Management
3. Further positive discrimination

- a. Increase, or provide a greater allotment of full scholarships to BME UK-domiciled students who demonstrate inability to fund themselves
- b. Consult BME students forum for persons or organisations that these students may want to get in touch with for future prospects and facilitate such networking as best possible
- c. LSE's various student services (LSE Life, CV advisors etc) could reach out to specific neighbourhoods or schools with minority students, offering one-on-one or group mentorship to help guide and motivate students through university application process, job preparedness etc., in consultation and cooperation with BME and other students

## **Bibliography**

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